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AUTHOR MacDonald, Irene M.; da Costa, Jose L.
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ABSTRACT

Research on school violence has slowly gained momentum in Canada, underscoring the concern some educators are expressing about the frequency of behaviors that seriously disrupt student learning. This paper presents findings of a study that compared students' and administrators' perceptions of the nature, extent, awareness, and management of violent behavior in their schools. Data were derived from a questionnaire of 231 students in grades 7, 8, and 9 in 5 Alberta junior high schools and 28 junior high school administrators. Findings indicate that: (1) Students may be increasingly accepting violence as part of their schooling experience; (2) there are more student observers than victims or perpetrators of violence; (3) students are indecisive about the gravity of certain behaviors and hesitate to report violence due to fears of retaliation; and (4) administrators perceived violence to be less of a problem than did students and believed that they were more aware of the extent of violence than were students. Four recommendations are made for narrowing the "perception gap" between students and administrators: provide support services for victims of school violence; redesign discipline policies to recognize the interrelationships among victims, perpetrators, and witnesses; seek input from students on policies and practices; and support witnesses or victims who report violent incidents. Ten tables are included. (Contains 18 references.) (LMI)

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REFRAMING THE MEANING OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE: PERCEPTIONS OF ALBERTA JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

by

Irene M. MacDonald & José L. da Costa

Department of Educational Policy Studies
Faculty of Education
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Canada T6G 2G5

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Reframing the Meaning of School Violence: Perceptions of Students

Research on school violence has slowly gained momentum in Canada, underscoring the concern some educators are expressing regarding the commonness of behaviors which seriously disrupt student learning. Unlike many of the larger urban centers of the United States, Canadian communities are struggling of late with understanding how serious the problem of school violence has become. Are concerns regarding school violence, as West (1993) argued, an overstatement of a low-key problem motivated by political winds? Or, does there exist a "code of silence" that serves to downplay the true nature and extent of an escalating problem? Have Canadian students become more violent? Are schools safe? These are just a few of the questions that need to be addressed from various perspectives in order to place Canadian school violence into context.

This paper seeks to: (a) interpret the meaning of violence in the school setting; (b) summarize recent data related to the extent of the problem; (c) introduce preliminary research exploring students' perceptions regarding their understanding, as victims and perpetrators, of the nature and frequency of school violence as well as their perceptions of teacher and administrator awareness of, and response to, such violent behaviors.

Review of the Literature

A recent survey of British Columbia secondary students indicated that violence and drugs were two of the most commonly cited weaknesses of public schooling (cited in BCTF, 1994). Statistics Canada (1994, cited in Day, Golench, MacDougall, & Beals-Gonzalez, 1995) data indicated that "23% of all violent crime victims were teenagers between 12 and 19 years, double their representation in the 1990 Canadian population... 23% of those accused of violent crimes against younger teen victims were 12-15 themselves and a further were 16-19" (p. 10).

Some studies seem to also indicate that violent youth crimes at schools have increased in degree and frequency. A recent survey of police services and school boards across Canada (Gabor, 1995) found that 80% of respondents felt that there was more violence in schools now than what existed 10 years ago. Thirty percent considered the situation "much worse" and none believed that the incidence of school violence was lessening.

The increased concern over school violence and serious disruptive behaviors has initiated somewhat sporadic Canadian research about the nature and extent of the problem. A recent study in Calgary's junior and senior high schools (Smith, Bertrand, Arnold, & Hornick, 1995) identified nine types of victimizations: "something damaged, something stolen, something taken by force, threatened, slapped or kicked, threatened with weapon, attacked by group/gang, someone exposed themselves, sexually touched against will" (p. 36). Of these, something stolen (55.6%), something damaged (43.6%), being threatened (42.3%), and being slapped or kicked (37.1%) were the most prevalent victimizations identified amongst students.

The violence observed in Canadian schools cannot be viewed in isolation from the violence prevalent in our society. This generation of youth, for example, faces the following: (a) by the time a person is 18, he or she has viewed 28,000 murders on television; (b) a woman is sexually assaulted every six minutes in Canada; (c) the biggest users of pornography are boys between 12-18 years of age; (d) four of every ten sexual assault victims involve children, four involve teens; (e) of the 150,000 street children in Canada, 94% have been physically abused and 80% have been sexually abused. Thirty-five percent of the criminal caseload in Canada is comprised of Young Offender Act violations and represent crimes that are committed both in and out schools (Newark, & Kessel, 1994).

It could, therefore, be argued that school violence is simply a reflection of the violence that is seen and experienced in society. However, Smith et al. (1995) found that, with the exception of weapons threats and being attacked by a gang or group, all victimization rates were higher while at school than while not at school, thereby challenging some educators who contend that youth violence is a problem more prevalent in the larger community than in schools.

Although this is slowly changing, perceptions on issues related to school violence have been drawn primarily from administrators (e.g., Wall, 1995), teachers (e.g., BCTF, 1994; Wall, 1991), and police (e.g., Newark & Kessel, 1994), but not extensively from students themselves. Studies that have collected student data point to a plethora of violent behaviors that are typically underreported or underplayed by adults (e.g., Heath, 1994; Kasian, 1992; Mathews, 1994; Pepler & Craig, 1994; Ryan, Mathews & Banner, 1993; Walker, 1994). Garofalo, Siegel and Laub (1987) found that some children may feel that adults are inept or disinterested in protecting them from bullies and therefore consciously choose to keep their victimization to themselves. Observations by Craig and Pepler (cited in Pepler & Craig, 1994) found that teachers were relatively unaware of bullying incidents and responded to only four

percent of incidents observed by the researchers. Compounding the problem is the fact that students themselves are reluctant to report incidents of violence (e.g., Ryan, Mathews, & Banner, 1993). Walker's study (1994) on weapons use in Canadian schools asked police to rank reasons for the reluctance of schools to report weapons. Of the thirteen possible answers, "denial or avoidance that a problem exists," "not recognizing there is a problem," "the school was able to deal with issues themselves," "differences in educators' and police' philosophies" were the four most frequently top-rated factors (p. 17).

Despite differing views on the true nature and extent of school violence, there is a general consensus that schools must provide students with a safe learning environment. What is not as readily agreed upon, given the contention that school violence simply mirrors societal violence, is who is ultimately responsible for addressing the root causes of violent behaviors in schools. As Schmidt, Paquette and Dickinson (1990) argued, schools cannot be expected to solve all of the ills of society.

Whereas it makes good sense to have collaboration amongst students, teachers, administrators, parents, police, the courts, and government in addressing youth crime and violence, society's best investment still lies in the education system (Newark & Kessel, 1994). Schools must continually improve and develop new strategies to deal with violent behavior by first confronting and understanding the nature and extent of the problem. To date, however, the majority of school boards across Canada have not developed formal policies in the areas of early and on-going intervention or prevention of school violence (Day et al., 1995).

School violence has often been synonymous with criminal activities that occurred at school: gang wars, illicit drug use, vandalism, weapon possession, and personal assault (Marvin, McCann, Connolly, Temkin & Henning, 1976). The problem with framing violence in such narrow, legalistic terms is that it remains a law enforcement issue (Mawhinney, 1995). Broadening the definition to include physical and non-physical acts, harassment, verbal slurs and threats of injury (Jaffe, 1993) recognizes that there are victims of many violent, unindictable, deliquent behaviors.

The meaning of school violence has gradually evolved beyond definitions found in the Criminal Code. From the point of view of a teacher or school administrator, school violence encompasses those behaviors which seriously disrupt the safe learning environment of a classroom or school. It encompasses "anything that affronts a child or teacher or staff member's ability to function in a safe, conductive learning environment" (Wiseman, 1993, p.

3). At a recent Canadian Conference on Violence in Schools, the context of violence was expanded further to include "anything that denies human dignity and leads to a sense of helplessness and hopelessness" (attributed to Martin Luther King by Lalonde, 1994).

Although there is some disagreement (e.g., Wall, 1995; West, 1993), the prevailing view on defining school violence is that it encompasses both physical and psychological harm. Within this framework, school violence is not limited to schools in large urban centres. Surreptitious, and often subtle, forms of violence such as intimidation, harassment, and discrimination can occur in any school: urban, rural or public or separate, suburban or inner-city.

Purpose of the Study

Providing students with a safe community for learning, requires an understanding of the extent and context of school violence from the perspective of today's students. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students and to compare them to those of administrators with respect to the nature extent, awareness, and management of violent behavior in their schools. In general, the questions asked of students were directed at determining how safe they felt in their schools; whether or not they perceived their school as an environment of violence, and if so, what they perceived to be the nature of the violent incidents experienced.

Data were gathered to allow analysis on the basis of many variables, including: grade, gender, and the perceived seriousness of the incident itself. Questions related to the management of school violence addressed how satisfied students were with the manner in which either victims or perpetrators of violence were dealt with by school administrators and teachers.

Method

This study was exploratory in nature, given the limited amount of research conducted on Alberta students' perceptions of school violence. Its primary purpose was to develop the beginnings of an understanding of the issues through quantitative methods and highlight areas which could benefit from future research. Although the findings did corroborate much of the recent Canadian research, this study did not seek to advance generalizations on the topic of school violence or, more specifically, violence in Alberta's junior high schools.

Sample

Data were gathered using a two-pronged approach: (a) a questionnaire was used to collect data from the administrators and students of five selected junior high schools, and (b) questionnaires were mailed to the 39 junior high school administrators of the three districts used in the student study.

Primary Data Source. The sample of students completing the questionnaire was dictated by three factors: (a) school selection by district central administration (there was one exception, the principal of one school contacted the researcher and asked that his school be included in the study for reasons not provided); (b) class selection by the schools' principals; (c) individual student participation by providing signed and returned student and parental consent forms. Individual classes were designated by the principals for study by the researcher. Hence, the sample of students and principals was not randomly selected.

The sample consisted of 231 grades 7, 8, and 9 students drawn from five central Alberta junior high schools. The students and the principals, of the respective schools, were asked to complete a questionnaire comprised of 13 Likert-type questions. One open-ended question was included at the end of the survey asking participants about their thoughts on school violence.

Of a possible 381 students, a total of 231 completed the questionnaire; this represented 56% females (n=130) and 44% males (n=101). Table 1 outlines the student participation rates in the study.

Questionnaires were administered to the students in their classrooms or in a designated area (e.g., library) by the researcher. Neither teachers nor students who did not present valid consent forms were present.

Five principals of the selected schools were requested to complete a questionnaire similar to that of the students. These were completed during the time that the students were administered surveys by the researcher.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

Secondary Data Source. Questionnaires were mailed to the 39 junior high schools in the three districts represented. Twenty-three junior high school administrators completed a mail-out questionnaire, representing approximately a 60% response rate. Demographic data of respondents are presented in Table 2.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

School Demographics

Each of the five schools in the study were stand-alone junior high schools; four public and one public-separate. Schools that participated in the study were representative of a broad spectrum of socio-economic conditions. Schools "S" and "B" were located in an urban center with a population of approximately 60,000. The community consists of largely white middle to upper-middle class residents. This community has a high percentage of young families; families with children 10-14 years of age being most dominant.

Schools " D," "C," and "H" were also located in a large urban center with an approximate population of 700,000 people. These schools serve communities which are densely populated, multi-cultural, and consist primarily of lower to lower-middle class people. Youth crime, especially ethnic gang-related crime, is a problem in these areas. School "D," in particular, has a long-standing reputation for being "a tough school."

The Questionnaires

Student. Data were collected from students about their understanding of the nature and frequency of school violence as well as their perceptions of teacher and principal awareness of and response to such violent behaviors. These included: (a) fights, (b) verbal threats, (c) threats with weapons, (d) things damaged or stolen, (e) bullying, (f) punching, grabbing, hitting, (g) sexual harassment, (h) teasing, swearing, name calling, (i) being spat upon, and (j) ethnic conflict. The student questions were directed at determining how safe they felt in school; whether or not they perceived their school to have a violent environment, and if so, what they perceived to be the nature of the violent incidents experienced. Questions related to the students' perceptions of the management of school violence asked students how satisfied they were with the ways that victims and perpetrators of violence were dealt with by the school principal and teachers.

The list of violent behaviors used in the questionnaire was generated by reviewing a study of students on school violence conducted in Toronto (Ryan, Mathews, & Banner, 1993) as well as consulting a group of five junior high

school students prior to the pilot study. It is felt that this consultative process resulted in a more comprehensive list of violent behaviors and one that the students could relate to.

Administrator. The administrator questionnaires asked the same questions as those asked of students; with the exception that the questions were reworded to reflect the administrative context.

Data Analysis

A number of methods were used to analyze questionnaire data: (a) frequency counts and percentages were derived for each question, and (b) comparisons were made of responses based on grade and sex to determine if differences existed among groups: gender, student grade, students and administrators. Responses to the open-ended question were analyzed thematically.

To test for significant differences ($\propto = 0.05$) amongst pairs of data (e.g., male/female, administrator/students); t-tests were performed using SPSS Release 4.0 for Macintosh. Analysis of variance between grades used the Scheffe procedure of multiple comparisons with $\propto$ set at the 0.05 level. This was done to determine which pairs of grades (7, 8; 7, 9; or 8, 9) had significantly different means.

Written responses were analyzed on the basis of emergent "themes" related to issues identified through the review of related research. Selected comments were used to enhance and supplement relevant statistical findings.

Findings and Discussion

The findings obtained from the data collected from the sample of 231 students, as well as their principals are summarized below. The analysis and discussion is divided into five subsections: (a) student perceptions of safety at school, (b) perceived extent of the problem, (c) dealing with violence, (d) perceptions of schools' management of violence, and (e) administrators' perceptions.

Interpretations of "Feeling Safe"

In general, students felt safe at school (see Table 3). There were no significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) found between female and male students, or among grades in student responses to this question. Approximately 75% of the students said that they felt safe at school "always" or "most of the time." Yet, over one-half of male students indicated that

they had experienced physical forms of violence (e.g., fights, bullying, punching, hitting, grabbing), verbal threats, and theft or damage of property. Approximately 35% of female students had experienced fights, bullying, punching, hitting or grabbing and theft or damage to property, and verbal threats were experienced by 60% of females. One-fifth of male students indicated that they had been threatened with a weapon at school. Sexual harassment was experienced by over 25% of female students, and ethnic conflict affected one-third of male respondents. One-fifth of students observed weapon threats and over half considered bullying to be "very big" or "big" problems. Despite these responses, only 4% of students responded that they "never" felt safe at school. It would appear that students have an interesting concept of what it means to feel safe at school (see Table 4).

(Insert Table 3 about here)

(Insert Table 4 about here)

Thirty-four (19%) of the students who provided comments on the questionnaire, wrote positively about their school, indicating that violence was not a problem:

> I think right now it's [school violence] not a big problem because it really doesn't affect me (grade 9 female)
>
> School violence isn't really a problem in our school, except for the few odd people. (grade 7 female)
>
> I think that in this school violence is almost non-existent. However, racism is, I'm a victim of it and I don't like it. (grade 7 female)

Notwithstanding such seemingly positive perspectives, approximately 45% of the students wrote comments which portray an interesting perception of what constitutes "feeling safe":

> Elementary school I feel is pretty safe but junior high seems to be a big step and is much more dangerous. If junior high is this dangerous what is high school going to be like? (grade 8 male)
>
> It [school violence] has increased and more girls get involved. People are more tough and some people are scared of getting beaten up. (grade 9 female)
>
> I think school violence sucks because it makes people afraid to come to school. It makes people more self-conscious. You coordinate your wardrobe or do your hair differently just so you don't become a victim for being the way you are. (grade 9 female)
>
> I think it's not fair because alot of people get beaten up. (grade 7 male)

Extent of the Problem: Victims and Witnesses

Students were asked to indicate, based on observation and personal experience, what they perceived to be the extent of certain violent behaviors at school (see Table 5). The three highest ranking problems were: (a) "teasing, swearing, name calling;" (b) "theft/vandalism;" and (c) bullying. "Threats with weapons" was perceived to be a "little problem " or "no problem" by over 80% of student respondents.

(Insert Table 5 about here)

Gender was a factor in only one category of observed violent behaviors. Female students observed "sexual harassment" (mean = 2.25) to be a larger problem than did the male students (mean = 1.77) . Females were consistent in that they also ranked "sexual harassment" as a bigger problem based on personal experience (mean = 1.94) than male students (mean = 1.45). Males ranked only the problem of "fights" as a bigger problem based on their personal experience (mean = 2.22) than did female students (mean= 1.94).

On the basis of personal observations, grade 7 students considered "verbal threats" to be a bigger problem (mean= 2.89) than did students in either grade 8 (mean= 2.45) or grade 9 (mean= 2.51). This is an interesting finding since significantly more (α= 0.05) grade 8 students had personally experienced "verbal threats;" "punching, hitting, grabbing;" "bullying;" "ethnic conflict;" and yet did not consider these behaviors as "big" or "very big" (see Table 6).

(Insert Table 6 about here)

One possible explanation for this difference could be that, although grade 8 students experience and witness more violent behaviors, they have been conditioned to have a higher tolerance for violent behaviors and therefore do not consider them to be a " big problem." The Ryan et al. (1993) study found similar trends. The researchers hypothesized that as students got older, they began to interpret violence as a "normal" part of their school experience. Several student comments support this view:

I think we get used to "bad stuff" because it happens so often. (grade 9 male)

I've seen so much of it [school violence] that it's hard to tell what's a problem and what isn't. (female grade 8)

Violence is a part of this world and most people have come to accept that and deal with it by taking self-defense courses and carrying weapons. I'd like to see how you try and change the way people in the world today think. (female grade 8)

Dealing with Violence

Students were asked to classify a list of ten behaviors as minor, major infractions or undecided. Approximately 60% of the students classified "threats with weapons," "things damaged or stolen," "sexual harassment" and "ethnic conflict" as major infractions. "Punching, hitting and grabbing" was considered to be a major infraction by over half of the students; and yet "fights" was ranked as minor by 56% of students. The majority (54 %) of students considered bullying to be a minor infraction. The greatest degree of indecision was encountered in students' attempts to classify bullying and ethnic conflict as major or minor infractions. Although it was not explored further in this study, one possible explanation for this indecision could be inconsistent responses on the part of teachers or administrators to perpetrators of bullying and ethnic conflict.

Students were asked to indicate their ability to deal with specified conflict situations. Twenty-eight percent of students responded that they did not know how to deal with "threats with weapons." Overall, students felt least able to deal with the following conflict situations: "sexual harassment," " stolen or damaged property," and ethnic conflict. Slightly over one half of students "always" or "most of the time" felt that they could deal effectively with bullying, fights, and verbal threats.

In all but three situations (spitting on someone, ethnic conflict and sexual harassment) males indicated significantly higher ($\alpha = 0.05$) confidence in their ability to deal effectively with conflict (see Table 7). Grade differences were not as pronounced as those between gender, with one exception: grade 8 students indicated a higher perceived ability to deal with "punching, hitting, grabbing" effectively (mean= 2.97) than either grade 7 (mean= 2.57) or grade 9 (mean=2.79) students.

(Insert Table 7 about here)

When asked whether or not they knew how to deal effectively with conflict, a number of strategies for coping were presented by students. These included adopting a complacent attitude, retaliation, fear, and avoidance:

> If someone is beating you up you have the right to beat them up. (grade 9 female)
>
> There are some fights at lunch or after school and people get hurt but I think the fights are funny and fun to watch. (grade 8 male)
>
> People shouldn't fight for no reason but fighting does solve problems for us so adults should just stay out of it, we can handle it ourselves. (grade 9 female)
>
> I think that school violence is everywhere and there's so much of it that it's normal to watch a fight...it's everyone's source of entertainment. (grade 8 female)
>
> Sometimes in the morning coming to school or passing a different Jr high or high school I feel insecure. I try to walk by quickly or get to class. When someone tells me someone is out to get me. I get scared. I look around before I go outside and look inside the bathroom before I go. (grade 8 male)
>
> ...they punch you for no reason and attack you on a field for no reason. I can't defend myself or he'll get more of his friends that are tougher then mine. (grade 9 male)
>
> I think that school violence should try to be stopped, because some people are afraid to even come to school, because they think they'll be beaten up. (grade 8 female)
>
> I think school violence is a big problem ...when one of my friends have been beaten up I'm afraid to come to school the next week or so...I was so f...ing scared that I'd be next and it would be my ass they were kicking. (grade 8 female)
>
> Violence stops us from talking to people cause the more people you know the more likely you are to get in a fight. (grade 8 female)
>
> I think people should start carrying weapons to protect themselves. (female grade 8)

Students' Perceptions of School Response to Violence

Students did not perceive that their teachers and administrators were always aware of violent behaviors at school. Grade differences were only significant in the following categories: "verbal threats"; "punching, hitting, grabbing"; "sexual harassment"; and "teasing, swearing, name-calling." Grade 7 students consistently responded that they felt teachers were more aware than did students in either grade 8 or grade 9 (see Table 8). Gender differences which were also significant, occurred in the categories of "fights" and "threats with weapons." Female students

indicated that they felt teachers were more aware of fights (mean= 2.57) and weapon threats (mean= 2.41) than male students considered teacher's to be aware of (mean for fights= 2.33, mean for weapons threats= 1.95).

(Insert Table 8 about here)

As illustrated by the following comments, this perception that there is a gap between students' and teachers' awareness of school violence, often leads to a sense of frustration and a belief that violence is largely ignored:

> I think that there is alot of conflict within our school. There is so much going on, and yet no one does anything about it. (grade 8 female)
>
> I think alot of things are not noticed by teachers, principals. (grade 9 male)
>
> Some things are so common that they are ignored...teachers don't care enough about name calling, ethnic fights, teasing and stealing. They only care if blood is spilled so they can't be charged. Name calling can be hurtful but nobody cares. (grade 8 female)
>
> I think the teachers could do more and not sit in the staff room [and] eat donuts and drink coffee they should look for more violence. (grade 7 male)

Students were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with the treatment of victims and perpetrators of violence in their school. Over half of the students were dissatisfied with the way victims of school violence were treated. A slightly smaller percentage were satisfied with the way perpetrators were treated. There were no significant differences by gender. Grade differences were only noted in student satisfaction with the treatment of perpetrators, not victims; the grade 7 students expressing greater satisfaction (see Table 9).

(Insert Table 9 about here)

In their comments, a number of students advocated changes to the laws governing young offenders, more severe punishments for perpetrators, a focus on societal violence and a fairer treatment of victims:

> If you can help get school violence like bullying out it will feel safer except that often you will tell on someone they will want to fight ...so you have to protect the victims. (grade 8 male)
>
> The teachers need to be more strict with worse punishments. I know my brother causes some trouble and he does it because he can get away with it. (grade 8 female)

> I think that the kids should be punished more because of their bad behaviors...I think that the law should get involved in certain situations, because when bad stuff happens to you, it doesn't just blow over, its with you forever. (grade 8 female)
>
> Sometimes the principal never does anything. I was threatened by a lot of popular people, that is why I never want to be popular. (grade 8 female)

It is noteworthy that not all students recommended increased intervention on the part of school staff. In fact, several students suggested that teachers "mind their own business" and leave students to cope with violence on their own terms:

> I guess school violence is a large problem, because most of my friends carry weapons...I don't really want anything done about school violence. I think this is the way that people learn how to stick up for themselves in real life. Violence itself is a part of this world, and most people have come to accept that and deal with it. (grade 8 female)
>
> I think you should just let the kids deal with it because they're in junior high already, they know how to take care of themselves. I think the teachers and principal should keep their noses out of kid's business. (grade 7 female)
>
> Nothing will happen to you if you have backup like tough friends or older brothers. If someone does something get your backup or connections and get him beaten up even if hospitalized. (grade 7 male)

Schools are, in many respects, considered to be mirrors of society; youth crime and violence spilling from streets to classrooms and vice versa. Sadly, for some of these young people violence seems to have become "normal" and considered to be a natural part of growing up:

> I think we get used to "bad stuff" because it happens so often. (grade 9 male)
>
> I've seen so much of it [school violence] that it's hard to tell what's a problem and what isn't. (female grade 8)
>
> Violence is a part of this world and most people have come to accept that and deal with it by taking self-defense courses and carrying weapons. I'd like to see how you try and change the way people in the world today think. (female grade 8)

Administrators' Perceptions of School Response to Violence

Of a possible 39 respondents in the secondary data source, 23 administrators completed and returned a mail-out questionnaire. After aggregating the responses from these 23 respondents as well as the five primary

administrators, analysis of variance between administrators' (n = 28) and students' (n = 231) questionnaire responses showed significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) as summarized (see Table 10):

1. Administrators perceived that school violence was less a problem than students did.
2. Administrators considered students to be more capable of dealing effectively with "threats with a weapon," but less capable in the categories of "verbal threats" and "teasing, swearing, name calling" than students did.
3. Administrators perceived that students were more satisfied with the treatment of victims and perpetrators of violence than students did.
4. Administrators felt that they and their staff were more aware of school violence than did students.

Administrators and students did not differ significantly ($\alpha = 0.05$) in their perceptions of: (a) how safe students felt at school, (b) how much of a problem weapons threats and spitting on someone were at school, and (c) teacher awareness of theft and vandalism.

Although administrators considered their own schools as relatively violence-free, several comments pointed to an appreciation for the seriousness of violence in schools:

> If we do not take immediate and severe action, then we are giving a message that it [school violence] is not serious. By our response we demonstrate the degree of acceptability...school violence does affect learning and should not be tolerated.
>
> Bullying and threats elevate to violence of the highest order.
>
> Take a stand that students who seriously contravene the law and school regulations will lose their right to a public education. The safety of the majority far outweighs the rights of the serious violators.

Of the comments received from administrators: (a) 19% suggested a community-based resolution, (b) 26%, a need for a greater awareness of school violence, (c) 31% advocated greater consequences for offenders, (d) 23% of respondents sought a move towards a zero tolerance of school violence, and (e) 42% felt solutions lay in more student rules and clearer behavioral expectations.

(Insert Table 10 about here)

Conclusions and Recommendations

The following section addresses conclusions reached in the study. Theoretical and practical implications along with recommendations for future research are also outlined.

Conclusions

The intent of this study was to explore the perceptions of students and administrators with respect to the nature, extent, awareness, and management of violent behaviors in their schools. This purpose was pursued through a questionnaire study of 231 students and 28 administrators representing junior high schools in central Alberta. The analysis of the findings presented point to the following conclusions:

1. Students may be increasingly accepting violence as part of their schooling experience. Therefore, responses to the general question of "do you feel safe at school" must be explored in depth and within the context of student perceptions of what constitutes "safe."
2. Students who indicated behaviors were more than a "little problem," did so primarily on the basis of observation, not personal experience. This finding confirms the belief of many administrators and researchers that there are more student observers than victims or perpetrators of violence (Mathews, 1994).
3. Students face indecision about the gravity of certain behaviors, a lack of confidence in knowing how to deal with potentially serious conflicts (e.g., threat with a weapon), hesitation over reporting the witnessing or victimization of violence, due to fears of retaliation.
4. A "perception gap" between administrators and students is evident; pointing to either an intentional or unconscious underplaying of the extent and effective management of school violence. Thus, an important challenge for educators is to recognize that school violence may affect far more students than is realized.

Recommendations

The findings of this study indicated that student and administrator perceptions of school violence did differ in many respects. In addition to the need for continued research in the field of school violence, four recommendations arise from becoming aware of this "perception gap" :

1. A number of salient comments were provided by students expressing their feelings of frustration related to their belief that little could be done to change positively the anxieties and fears that are part of actual or expected victimization. Greater attention should be placed on the treatment of victims of school violence; in particular, victims of bullying and sexual harassment. Unfortunately, aftermath support services which are designed to "address the trauma experienced by victims and witnesses of violent acts" (Day, et al., 1995, p. 191) are rarely found in districts across Canada.

2. Discipline policies must be revisited in order to recognize the interrelationships between victims, perpetrators, and witnesses of school violence. Policies which are designed to provide a list of consequences for perpetrators of inappropriate behaviors ignore the relationship between students experiencing high levels of victimization and those same students later demonstrating their own delinquency. In support of this contention, a number of students expressed a preference for taking matters into their own hands if faced with victimization. In this regard, it would be worthwhile to determine if increasing the effectiveness of response to victims of school violence would substantially reduce the number of incidents. For example, if student victims of bullying or theft of property were provided with ways in which the school staff would assist in ameliorating the problem on their behalf, perhaps students would be less likely to take matters into their own hands in the form of retaliation against the perpetrators.

3. Current policies and practices, if developed on the basis of administrator or teacher perceptions and assumptions of students' perceptions of school violence, should be validated by seeking input from students. As an example from the findings presented, students are not satisfied with what teachers perceive to be effective consequences for bullies. A positive outcome could be an evaluation and possible modification of prevailing policies and practices governing such behaviors.

4. Witnesses or victims of violence who report such, need to be met with a caring and positive response which results in a meaningful, learning experience. A number of salient comments provided by students indicated that this was not always their experience. Students were often

undecided as to the seriousness of infractions, and lacked confidence in dealing effectively with certain conflict situations. They expressed feelings of frustration related to a belief that little could be done to positively change the anxieties and fears that accompanied actual or expected victimization.

Increased Canadian interest in the area of school violence underscores the concern that educators and the public are expressing regarding the prevalence of behaviors which seriously disrupt student learning. As suggested by the findings of this study, although many administrators agree that school violence is a serious phenomenon, they also believe that it largely exists outside of their own school. Students hold very different views regarding the magnitude and nature of the problems they face as victims or witnesses of school violence.

The challenge is for schools to seek ways to narrow this "perception gap" so as to affirm their commitment to students that their safety and well-being is of paramount importance. Contined efforts directed towards policies, programs, and practices designed to effectively prevent and respond to school violence will hopefully persuade students that fear or retaliation are not their only options; they need not accept destructive physical or psychological conflicts as a natural part of adolescence.

Table 1. Frequency distributions of students who participated in the study by school, grade, and gender

School	Grade 7		Grade 8		Grade 9		Total		Participation
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Rate
B	9	11	10	7	1	16	20	34	72%
C	9	15	14	18	4	6	27	39	64%
D	3	5	7	10	12	6	22	21	52%
H	2	12	3	3	3	5	7	20	38%
S	11	10	6	14	6	14	25	16	84%
Totals	34	53	33	38	34	39	101	130	

Table 2. Demographic data of all Administrator respondents

School District:	Public	Separate	Urban	Rural
n =	27	7	27	1

Student Population:	<250	251-500	501-1000	>1000
n =	4	14	9	1

Years as Administrator:	< 2	2-5	5-10	>10
n =	2	3	7	16

Table 3. Students' perceptions of feeling safe at school.

Feeling Safe:	Always	Most of the Time	Sometimes	Never	Undecided
% of Students:	26%	53%	15%	4%	2%

Students ranked feeling safe on a 5-point scale; 4= Always; 3= Most of the time; 2= Sometimes; 1= Never; Undecided

Table 4. Percentage and frequency distributions of students who have experienced behaviors by gender and total

Behavior	Female (n=130)		Male (n=101)		Total (n=231)	
	%	freq.	%	freq.	%	freq.
Fights	35.4	46	71.3*	72	51.1	118
Threats with weapons	12.3	16	19.8	20	15.6	36
Verbal threats	60.0	78	74.3*	75	66.2	153
Things damaged or stolen	63.1	82	62.4	63	62.8	145
Bullying	36.9	48	64.4*	65	48.9	113
Punching, hitting, grabbing	40.0	52	70.3*	71	53.2	123
Sexual harassment	27.7	36	17.8	18	23.4	54
Spat upon	28.5	37	27.7	28	28.1	65
Teasing,swearing,name calling	83.8	109	83.2	84	83.5	193
Ethnic conflict	17.7	23	34.7*	35	25.1	58
Other	3.1	4	3.0	3	3.0	7

Students were asked to mark with a check (√) from a list provided, what they had experienced at school. * Significant at α =0.05

Table 5. Comparison of students' perceived extent of personally experienced school-based violence versus observed extent of school violence

	Mean of Extent of Problem	
Behavior	Observed	Experienced
Fights	2.55	2.06*
Threats with weapons	1.86	1.59*
Verbal threats	2.64	2.32*
Things damaged or stolen	2.75	2.29*
Bullying	2.67	2.14*
Punching, hitting, grabbing	2.68	2.16*
Sexual harassment	2.05	1.73*
Spat upon	1.99	1.67*
Teasing,swearing,name calling	2.95	2.57*
Ethnic conflict	2.19	1.86*

Students ranked extent of violent incidents on a 4-point scale;
4= A very big problem; 3= A big problem; 2= A little problem; 1= No problem.
* Significance at α =0.05

Table 6. Students' perceived extent of personally experienced school-based violence by grade.

Behavior	Mean of Personally Experienced violence		
	Grade 7 (n=84)	Grade 8 (n=67)	Grade 9 (n=68)
Fights	2.01	2.19	2.00
Threats with weapons	1.59	1.62	1.57
Verbal threats	2.39	2.40	2.14
Things damaged or stolen	2.24	2.40	2.23
Bullying	2.21	2.06	2.15
Punching, hitting, grabbing	2.08	2.21	2.18
Sexual harassment	1.62	1.77	1.81
Spat upon	1.69	1.59	1.71
Teasing,swearing,name calling	2.62	2.69	2.40
Ethnic conflict	1.72	2.04	1.81

Students ranked extent of violent incidents on a 4-point scale; 4= A very big problem; 3= A big problem; 2= A little problem; 1= No problem. * Significance at $\alpha = 0.05$

Table 7. Extent to which students perceive their ability to effectively deal with conflicts in their school by gender

Behavior	Mean of Extent of Perceived Ability to Deal with Conflicts	
	Female (n=123)	Male (n=96)
Fights	2.58	2.96*
Threats with weapons	1.98	2.60*
Verbal threats	2.73	3.15*
Things damaged or stolen	2.50	2.86*
Bullying	2.64	2.96*
Punching, hitting, grabbing	2.59	2.98*
Sexual harassment	2.36	2.81*
Spat upon	2.68	2.88
Teasing,swearing,name calling	2.89	3.04
Ethnic conflict	2.60	2.89

Students ranked awareness on a 5-point scale; 4= Always; 3= Most of the time; 2= Sometimes; 1= Never. Significant difference at $\alpha = 0.05$

Table 8. Extent to which students perceive their teachers and Administrators to be aware of behaviors in their school by grade.

Behavior	Mean of Extent of Awareness		
	Grade 7 (n=84)	Grade 8 (n=67)	Grade 9 (n=68)
Fights	2.40	2.44	2.56
Threats with weapons	2.35	2.02	2.19
Verbal threats	2.46*	2.01	1.99
Things damaged or stolen	2.76	2.77	2.53
Bullying	2.27	2.12	2.03
Punching, hitting, grabbing	2.38*	2.21	2.00
Sexual harassment	2.56*	1.94	1.96
Spitting on someone	1.74	1.81	1.59
Teasing,swearing,name calling	2.33*	2.31	1.94
Ethnic conflict	2.48	2.19	2.15

Students ranked awareness on a 5-point scale; 4= Always; 3= Most of the time; 2= Sometimes; 1= Never. * Significance at $\alpha = 0.05$

Table 9. Extent to which Students Indicated Satisfaction with the Treatment of Victims and Perpetrators of School Violence.

Behavior	Mean of Extent of Student Satisfaction	
	Victims (n=221)	Perpetrators (n=221)
Fights	2.45	3.21***
Threats with weapons	2.68	3.38***
Verbal threats	2.19	3.07***
Things damaged or stolen	2.29	3.07***
Bullying	2.18	3.07***
Punching, hitting, grabbing	2.41	3.00***
Sexual harassment	2.41	3.09***
Spitting on someone	2.11	2.91***
Teasing,swearing,name calling	2.16	2.89***
Ethnic conflict	2.51	3.20***

Students ranked Satisfaction on a 5-point scale 4= Always; 3= Most of the time; 2= Sometimes; 1= Never; Undecided * Significance at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Table 10. Extent to which administrators and students perceive the observed extent of school violence

Behavior	Means of Extent of Observed Extent of School Violence	
	Total Students (n=231)	Administrator (n=28)
Fights	2.55	2.18*
Threats with weapons	1.86	1.79
Verbal threats	2.64	1.21*
Things damaged or stolen	2.75	1.96*
Bullying	2.67	2.15*
Punching, hitting, grabbing	2.68	2.11*
Sexual harassment	2.05	1.64*
Spitting on Someone	1.99	1.68
Teasing,swearing,name calling	2.95	2.29*
Ethnic conflict	2.19	1.46*

Students and Administrator responded on a 4-point scale: 4= Always; 3= Most of the time; 2= Sometimes; 4= Never. * Significance at $\alpha = 0.05$

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